

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of December 16, 2021

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Nathaniel Miller (absent), Charles Morse, and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Lawton Rutter (Chief, Ambulance Service), Thomas Alsheimer (Chair, Board of Listers), Shannon Palone (Pool Director), Mitch Osiecki (Zoning Administrator), Lynn Doney (Ambulance Service), Stephen DeMaio (Ambulance Service), Kaitlyn Keating (NCDN), Carlos Pinkham (NCDN), Carolyn Stevens (NCDN), Erin Hicks-Tibbles (NCDN), and Elroy Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m. Participants had the option of attending the meeting either in person or remotely through Go-to-Meeting.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIENCE.** Those persons present were asked to rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The remote contingent also participated as much as possible.

- III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):** None.

IV. DISCUSSION

a. Proposed FY 2022/2023 Town Budget

- 1. Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS).** Manager Schulz said the NAS Operations and Maintenance (O&M) budget will increase by 4.4% in the next fiscal year. Like most other municipal departments, this is largely due to wage increases for employees. There currently is a 5.7% salary increase for the NAS Chief but this probably will be adjusted upwards due to higher-than-expected Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) figures for the Northeast region. The budget for part-time NAS employees has increased from \$61,200 to \$68,000 due to an expected increase in run hours as well as wage increases for the more experienced EMTs. In the Contract Services budget, the Dispatching line item has been increased from \$35,800 to \$37,000 due to expected higher charges From Capital West for these services in the next fiscal year. This expected increase also will affect the budgets of the Fire Department and Police Department. The budget for Paramedic Intercept will decrease from \$9,000 to \$3,000 due to significantly reduced payments to outside agencies since NAS achieved paramedic certification in April 2021. This is expected to continue into the next fiscal year. There will be a \$3,000 increase in the Ambulance Billing Services line item as there are some payment adjustments to be made with the new contracted billing agent. The Materials/Supply budget will increase by 6% mainly due to a \$2,000 increase in the Medical Supplies line item. This is the result of higher costs for some items as well as expected higher usage due to the rising number of ambulance runs each year.

In the NAS Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, the Building Improvements account has a \$484.24 balance with \$1,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz noted a lot of work has been done in the facility in recent years, which included renovations to the bunkrooms, bathrooms, floors, ceilings, and the bay area. Therefore, not much needs to be added to this account for the time being. In the NAS Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, \$15,000 in surplus funds have been added for the remount of the 2014 ambulance unit, which will occur in the next fiscal year. There is a \$110,400 balance in this account and with the \$26,100 total to be added in FY 2022/2023, the estimated \$136,000 remount cost should be covered.

Board member Stevens had some questions about what was involved with an ambulance unit remount. NAS Chief Lawton said the vehicle's "box" or "module" would be removed from the current cab and chassis and installed on a new one. The box would be fully inspected and any needed repairs would be done at that time. It also will be sandblasted and repainted during the remount. This is a very big overhaul and the box usually is only remounted once. However, there have been exceptions based on its condition.

Board member Stevens asked if the new chassis would be four (4) wheel drive. Chief Rutter confirmed it would. Since he became NAS Chief, he has emphasized the need for four-wheel drive equipment due to Northfield's backroads, which can be especially treacherous during winter months and Mud Season. When he started, there was a mix of two- and four-wheeled drive vehicles and it was difficult to alternate their usage since you never knew the location of the next callout. Manager Schulz noted \$11,430 in prior year surplus funds were added to one of the PowerLoad accounts so that the patient lift assist could be installed during the remount. Another PowerLoad system will be purchased when the 2017 ambulance unit is replaced/remounted in FY 2026/2027. Chief Rutter said some of his EMTs have suggested using some of the COVID-19 testing revenue in order to purchase the second PowerLoad system during the next fiscal year. Chief Rutter noted this is injury-prevention equipment. Manager Schulz said it would be the decision of the Select Board members whether or not they would like to purchase the second PowerLoad system. COVID-19 testing revenue or other budget funds could be used. Chair Maxwell then asked if the Select Board members had any questions regarding the proposed NAS budget.

Board member Morse asked what was the lifespan of the unit box. Chief Rutter said the unit chassis is replaced every nine (9) years and the box usually is remounted only once, which makes an expected lifespan of about eighteen (18) years. A determination is made a year or two before the chassis replacement is scheduled on whether the box is suitable for another remount or if a whole new vehicle needs to be purchased. This will be the first remount for this particular box. Chair Maxwell asked how important was the purchase of a second PowerLoad system to the NAS. Chief Rutter said he has emphasized the importance of purchasing these power lift systems to the Select Board members over the past three (3) budget cycles. Back injury is a real risk when the EMTs have to lift patients' full weight when loading them into the back of an ambulance unit. This is an especial problem when dealing with obese or morbidly obese patients. Chair Maxwell said the current proposed NAS budget would delay the purchase of the second PowerLoad system for another five (5) years. Chief Rutter confirmed the current plan is to delay the purchase until the 2017 ambulance unit is replaced/remounted in FY 2026/2027. Chair Maxwell would like this matter revisited at a future budget meeting when remaining issues in the proposed FY 2022/2023 budget are discussed. He would like to hear management's explanation for delaying this purchase. Board member Goodrich favors using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to purchase the second PowerLoad system if this is allowed under the program. Chair Maxwell said this also could be discussed during the budget summary session.

Chief Rutter said it has been over eight (8) months since NAS achieved paramedic certification and there have been seventy-three (73) paramedic-level callouts in that timeframe. There have been savings of about \$17,000 as that much would have been spent bringing in outside ambulance agencies to provide paramedic services. Having NAS paramedics handling these callouts also means patients get appropriate treatment much sooner. Chair Maxwell asked about the one-time charge for this new certification. Chief Rutter said it was about \$15,000. Part of this included purchasing secure storage for the narcotics that NAS paramedics now would be dispensing. The future challenge is to increase the number of Northfield EMTs with paramedic status. There now are four (4) but only two (2) of them work extended hours throughout the year. Paramedic training takes considerable time and the cost depends on whether it is done in-person or online. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief Rutter for his participation in tonight's meeting and for his good work throughout the year.

2. **Municipal Pool.** Manager Schulz said the Personnel Services budget for operating the municipal pool will increase 8.4% in the next fiscal year (from \$44,380 to \$48,100). Since the pool was not open during the summer of 2020, this will be the first wage increase for the Pool Director and lifeguards in a couple years. Also, Vermont minimum wage will increase from \$11.75 to \$12.55 per hour on January 1, 2022 and this will affect the younger lifeguards. There are no other significant changes in the Municipal Pool's O&M budget.

In the Municipal Pool CIP budget, there is a \$54,131 balance in the Paint/Repair Pool account with \$7,930 to be added in FY 2022/2023. This work is scheduled for FY 2023/2024 so there should be sufficient funds available as the total cost is estimated at \$70,000. The Skimmer account has a \$29,179 balance with \$5,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. Manager Schulz said it has been difficult to find replacement skimmers that fit the configurations of our pool. Utility Superintendent Patrick DeMasi and his employees have done a great job of modifying new skimmers to fit properly but Mr. DeMasi is concerned that these modifications might not be possible for much longer. Mr. DeMasi has suggested hiring a consultant to find a more permanent solution. The Building/Facility Improvements account now has a negative balance of \$936 with \$2,500 to be added in FY 2022/2023. Only minor painting work on the bathhouse, etc. needs to be done next summer so this should be sufficient.

In the Municipal Pool CEP budget, there is a \$61,153 balance in the Pool Filter replacement account with \$7,500 to be added in the next fiscal year. This work is scheduled for FY 2024/2025 at an estimated cost between \$80,000 and \$100,000. A new Pool Vacuum was purchased last summer and should last about ten (10) years. There is a \$902 balance in this account and \$500 will be added each year for the foreseeable future to cover the eventual replacement. Manager Schulz said there are sufficient balances in the Diving Boards and Lifeguard Chairs accounts to fund needed purchases next summer.

Chair Maxwell asked if the \$30,000 budgeted for lifeguard wages was sufficient. Manager Schulz said this should be enough to pay those who want to work in Northfield this summer. Pool Director Shannon Palone said it is important to try to keep experienced lifeguards working here in Northfield even if the Montpelier and Randolph pools pay a little more.

Board member Morse asked if there would be a discussion of the public parks at some time. Manager Schulz believes this was discussed under Grounds/Parks/Facilities at an earlier budget meeting. Board member Morse said that must have been the one meeting he missed. Chair Maxwell said this could be reviewed again during the budget summary meeting. Board member Stevens asked how many lifeguards are at the pool on any given day. Ms. Palone said there were usually between six (6) and eight (8) working each day. Some help with the swimming lessons in the morning and others lifeguard during the free swimming in the afternoon. The industry standard is to have two (2) lifeguards on hand for every twenty-five (25) swimmers. Ms. Palone says the Northfield pool always has sufficient coverage even on hot days when you can get well over one hundred (100) swimmers at a time. Board member Stevens asked about the wage range for lifeguards. Ms. Palone said the younger lifeguards usually make minimum wage while the more experienced ones make over \$13 per hour. Chair Maxwell said market research was done a few years ago to determine if Northfield wages were competitive with those of other regional public pools. Ms. Palone said this study showed Northfield wages were a little low and this resulted in lifeguards getting a \$1 per hour raise. She noted Randolph does pay its starting lifeguards \$15 per hour. Chair Maxwell then thanked Ms. Palone for her report tonight and her good work as Pool Director.

3. **Energy Committee.** Manager Schulz said the Energy Committee's O&M budget is level budgeted at \$250. He reached out to the Energy Committee Chair and was told this amount is sufficient. The committee does apply for grant funds that cover the expense of any special projects they might be pursuing.
4. **Support Services.** Manager Schulz said the big change in this budget is that the Legal Services line item has been increased from \$18,000 to \$30,000. The higher amount is based on past actuals. Part of this expense is linked to the annual sale of properties with delinquent taxes, which means some of these costs are eventually reimbursed by the old or new property owner. Based on past actuals, the line item for annual membership fees to belong in the Mountain Alliance has dropped from \$10,500 to \$5,000. Had Northfield stayed with its previous solid waste management district (Mad River Resource Management Alliance), we might be paying about \$30,000 a year so this is a really good deal.

The line item for Green Mountain Transit's operation of the weekly shuttle bus and other individual services for Northfield's senior and disabled population remains level funded at \$3,350. This is separate from the weekday commuter bus service expense that voters are asked to approve on Town Meeting Day.

5. **Planning/Zoning.** Manager Schulz said this O&M budget has a 2.3% overall increase, most of which is due to the increase in the part-time Zoning Administrator's salary from \$22,070 to \$23,170. Under Contract Services, Northfield's membership fee to the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission (CVRPC) will drop from \$8,350 to \$7,870. This fee is based on per capita and Northfield's population dropped by about three hundred (300) in the 2020 census. There are no other real changes in this budget. Chair Maxwell noted Zoning Administrator Mitch Osiecki has had informal conversations with the Select Board members regarding the need to restructure Northfield's zoning fees in the near future. He asked if Mr. Osiecki wanted to discuss this now. Mr. Osiecki has done some research and has found that Northfield's zoning fees haven't been adjusted for several years and there are areas where we charge much less than similar Vermont communities. For example, the charges for holding a hearing before the Development Review Board (DRB) are so low that they sometimes don't even cover the expense of sending certified letters to adjoining property owners. In addition, Northfield charges \$50 for each lot subdivision while other communities charge as much as \$150. Mr. Osiecki was planning to perform more research and present a full proposal to the Select Board members early next year. Board member Morse would like to be sure Northfield residents are provided plenty of notice before any fee increases go into effect. Chair Maxwell then thanked Mr. Osiecki for the information.
6. **Economic Development.** Manager Schulz said there is a significant change in this budget since the Select Board members have authorized making the formerly part-time Economic Development Director (EDD) position a full-time position with benefits. This will increase the Personnel Services budget by 123.8% (from \$31,940 to \$71,490). The current plan is to pay the new employee \$27 per hour with thirty-two (32) work hours per week. ARPA funds will be used to fund this salary increase in the next fiscal year. Board member Morse felt this was a very important position in these uncertain economic times as there are a number of state and federal grants now available for which the new EDD could apply. Some opportunities have been lost in recent months without a permanent EDD in place. Board member Stevens doesn't believe the proposed salary would be sufficient to attract the best possible candidate. He thinks it should be increased to at least \$30 per hour. Board member Morse suggested the salary could be negotiated when the municipality focuses on a possible hire. It also is possible the new EDD could be an independent contractor. Board member Goodrich believes the discussion regarding compensation for the new full-time EDD already has taken place. Finance Director Laurie Baroffio noted that there are specific rules that must be followed whether someone is a municipal employee or an independent contractor. There are no gray areas. An independent contractor must be engaged by more than one employer while performing the same basic task. Board member Morse is not optimistic that a truly qualified candidate would be interested in becoming the Northfield EDD for the salary now proposed. If this position remains vacant for a prolonged time due to disputes over proper compensation, Northfield could lose out on a number of grant and other opportunities in the near future. It also would be good to have someone in the Municipal Building who can fully explain, for example, how our two (2) official Village Designations (Downtown and Northfield Falls) could benefit new or current businesses. The fact that Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) members are developing a Northfield Business Handbook will be helpful but it would be even better to have someone to explain these matters in person and provide direct assistance to entrepreneurs. Chair Maxwell asked if there have been any applicants yet for the EDD position. Manager Schulz said there have been four (4) to date. The initial deadline for applications is December 23, 2021. Chair Maxwell felt the first review of applicants should start early next year.

Carolyn Stevens from the NCDN said her organization strongly urges the Select Board members to hire a well-qualified applicant as soon as possible and pay that person accordingly. She also felt that grant-writing will be an important part of the position but there are other important tasks for the new EDD that would further local economic development as well as general improvements in Northfield. There is no one filling this role in the municipality currently and the community cannot rely on volunteers alone to move things in the right direction.

- 7. Board of Listers.** Manager Schulz said the Listers O&M budget actually will decline by 7.7% in the next fiscal year. Most of this is due to reduced personnel costs based on past actuals even though there will be per hour compensation increases for the part-time employee (Charlene Lathrop) and the elected Listers. Listers Chair Thomas Alsheimer confirmed that both he and Ms. Lathrop have reduced their working hours recently so the proposed budget amount is sufficient. Chair Maxwell asked if a town-wide reappraisal was on the horizon. Mr. Alsheimer said he should have more information about this when the Vermont Department of Taxes next contacts him in about a month. Town-wide reappraisals usually are conducted every ten (10) years and the last one in Northfield was started in 2012 and completed in 2015. Mr. Alsheimer noted a lot of Northfield property changed hands over the past couple years and many purchase amounts were far above the property's appraised value. Unless the Tax Department considers this an outlier due to the pandemic, Mr. Alsheimer thinks it likely it will trigger the next reappraisal in the next year or two. In the Board of Listers CIP budget, there is a \$157,249 balance in the reappraisal budget with \$18,000 to be added in the next fiscal year. The cost of the next town-wide reappraisal is estimated at \$200,000 but this expense would be spread over the multi-year process. Mr. Alsheimer believes the proposed budget for this is in good shape. He did say that the \$1,000 to be added to the Tax Map account in the next fiscal year could be eliminated. There is a \$5,997 balance in this account and this should be sufficient for any tax map work done in the near future. Chair Maxwell asked if the Select Board members had any questions or comments regarding this proposed budget.

Board member Morse felt the Board of Listers position is the most interesting among the various elected offices. Board member Stevens asked if the appraised value of a property could be adjusted upward based on its most recent sale price. Mr. Alsheimer said that was the practice in some states but not in Vermont. There would need to be a town-wide reappraisal in order to adjust parcel appraisals to their actual market values. Chair Maxwell has the impression that the next town-wide reappraisal will be coming sooner rather than later. Mr. Alsheimer said we will have a much better idea next month when Northfield's Common Level of Appraisal (CLA) is released by the state. The trigger for reappraisal is when the CLA falls below 85% or rises above 115%. Once we are informed that a town-wide reappraisal is needed, the Listers will develop the RFP documents, etc. If several Vermont communities are required to conduct a town-wide reappraisal in the near future, it might become problematic to hire in a timely manner a company that specializes in municipal property tax reappraisals.

Chair Maxwell said this meeting completes the first review of all the proposed budgets. The Select Board members will meet again early next year to review the budgets a second time and try to resolve any remaining issues.

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED). There was none.

VI. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to adjourn. **Motion passed 4-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 7:11 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the Select Board regular meeting of January 11, 2022.